

Remarks in a Roundtable Discussion on the V-Chip With Families in
Alexandria, Virginia
February 9, 1996

The President. First of all, I'd like to thank our hosts for welcoming us in and to all the members of the press and our guests here.

As you know, yesterday I signed into law the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which was the first major overhaul of our telecommunications laws in six decades. That bill will do an enormous amount of good for our country. It will, for consumers, open up vast new opportunities for entertainment, vast new opportunities for information, vast new opportunities for different kinds of communication. It will create many, many thousands of high-wage jobs. But it will also bring a lot more images and messages into every home in America.

One of the things that the Vice President, Mrs. Gore, and I like so much about this bill is that in addition to getting the benefits of the telecommunications revolution, it gives more power to the parents to control what their young children see on television by requiring all new television sets to have a V-chip in them.

And so we wanted to come here today to discuss with these folks how they feel about it and to give them and to give you a chance to see how this will work. So, I'd like to turn it over to the Vice President and give him a chance to make a demonstration and some comments.

[The Vice President said that the V-chip legislation would give parents the ability to make categorical choices about what their children could watch. He then demonstrated the V-chip concept by programming the host family's satellite television system to block movies exceeding a designated rating limit.]

The President. Let me explain. This technology—you get this if you hook into a satellite where you may have access to large numbers of channels and a large number of movies. The difference in this and the Telecommunications Act is that it requires this V-chip which I want to show you. This is a V-chip. And it will be required to be put into all new television sets so that as every family in America buys a new set, they will have this. The V-chip basically is a power to the parent, a technology marvel.

It enables everybody to have all the benefits of television. It will enable everyone to have the benefits of the new developments coming out of the telecommunications revolution, but it will give parents more control over the content of the programming to which their young children are exposed.

Let me say I think it's quite important. Just this week we have seen another major study chronicling the destructive impact on young children of hours and hours and hours of mindless violence and the so numbing impact it has on our young children.

So that's what the V-chip is designed to do. It will add about a dollar to the cost of every television set—a little less, actually. And we replace our TV sets at the rate of about 25 million a year, so as you can see, it will rapidly come to be a very important part of American family's arsenal of tools for raising children.

And there's another benefit that this will bring as well. I have challenged the leaders of the entertainment industry to come and meet with me about this, to talk about how we can develop a rating system for television programs like we have a rating system for movies. And we believe as more and more families get this and exercise their options under it and as more and more information is available to parents, that it will change the programming so that even parents who can't afford to buy a new television this year or next year as the V-chip comes out will begin to benefit from it.

So that's what the V-chip is. I guess I want to bring you back to Al, and he wants to say a few words before we turn it over to—

[The Vice President introduced Tipper Gore, who expressed her long-standing concern about children's exposure to graphic and violent television programming and thanked the President for enabling families to protect their children in their own homes. She then invited the participants to comment. The first participant said she was excited about the opportunity to decide what would come into her home through the airwaves. An elementary school principal and father said that television had more power to influence children than schools did in terms of

time and that the V-chip represented a giant step in saving the children. He also raised the issue of candy produced in the form of syringes.]

The President. What you said about the candy, that makes a point about what I think is important about the television violence study. It seems to me—and what you said about the hours—it's not so much—and I know a lot of people in the media who produce these programs get very defensive. They think they're being unfairly attacked. They talk about there's always good content, often a good moral to the story of some of these things. But it's the cumulative impact of it. I don't think they see it from the parents' perspective of the parents. It's not that our kids couldn't handle this program, that program, or the other program. It is a total impact of hour after hour after hour, day after day.

And the candy thing you mentioned made the point to me that—what it means is that people began to think of things as normal that we should never accept as normal, so we began to accept a level of violence in our society, that it's normal. It's not true. And that's the thing that bothers me. We have to go back. Now, one of the things that we've really worked hard on in our administration is trying to help communities reduce the crime rate. And I think we ought to—we need to keep at it until we go back to a time when people think that violence is abnormal, not normal; when crime is the exception, not the rule.

And I think that it's much harder if kids—like 5 hours a day, 6 days a week, for 15 years, they're dominated by this notion that it's a violent, brutal world, people do whatever they can get away with doing.

[The Vice President mentioned the estimate that a child would witness 20,000 simulated murders on television by high school graduation, and then asked if anyone had ever had to comfort a child whose sleep was affected by what they saw on television. Several participants answered that they had, and one complained that even if the programming was acceptable, the commercials could be a problem.]

The President. I must say, since I don't watch as much television as I used to, I was sort of unaware of that. But it's so interesting you said that, because my best friend from childhood called me yesterday, a guy I went to grade school with, and he has three wonderful chil-

dren. They're various ages, like your children. His oldest child is my daughter's age, and he has two younger ones. He said the same thing. He was talking about a show he was watching with his youngest child, a little girl, and he made the same point you did, that—no one had ever said this before, the disconnection between the programming content and the ads.

[The participant said that she felt she had to be there the entire time her child was watching. The Vice President said that broadcasters should correct that problem and cited ratings for theater movie previews. Two participants agreed that television ads posed a daily problem. Another participant said that the V-chip ratings system would have a direct impact as a guide even for people without V-chip televisions.]

The President. That's correct.

[The participant asked about the prospect for a low-cost installable V-chip.]

The President. That's a big problem. We're concerned about that. Do you want to talk about that?

[The Vice President said that there would be devices to make an older TV compatible with the V-chip system. He added that with the introduction of the V-chip, the dynamics in the marketplace would change in favor of programming that would not be blocked by the V-chip.]

The President. Keep in mind, though, the ratings, as we all know—all of us who've ever purchased advertising know—advertising rates are tied to rating rates. Income is all related to rating rates. If there are—let's say there are 300 million television sets in the United States, which is, I think, about right. That means within 4 years, at a 25-million-a-year replacement rate, a third of the television sets will have these. If, among the third, just a significant percentage—not even a majority, just a significant percentage of the parents with young children begin to use this along with the rating system, it will affect the overall ratings, and it will have a backup impact that will benefit the parents that don't own it.

Also, I think, to be fair, a lot of our children are still at a position in their life that if we knew enough to know what things to ask them not to watch, they wouldn't do it. I don't think we should minimize the fact that a lot of these problems are caused by blind ignorance.

[A participant said that she avoided unwanted programming at home by not watching television. The Vice President then asked the children for their comments. One child responded that he had nightmares after watching scary movies with a friend. Another child said that many parents were overprotective concerning television shows.]

The President. I agree with that. I think kids are a lot more—good kids that have good, loving parents and a good, loving home, they can handle a lot more sometimes than their parents think. I agree with that, but the only thing I would say in defense of the parents is, remember what I said in the beginning, it's not so much that one program. If it was just one program, you know, it wouldn't be—it is the total impact of this on families where there are no restrictions for hours and hours a day, every day of the week, for a whole childhood. It changes your outlook toward the world, and what is and is not acceptable, and what you think about human nature, and whether you're optimistic or pessimistic, in ways that you don't—you can't know while it's happening to you. That's what I would say in defense of stricter parents.

It's not that kids can't handle one thing, nearly any one thing. You know, you read a lot of examples of children that see horrible incidents on the street, and they grow up to be perfectly fine, wonderful people. It's the total impact. And that's why parents need to have this.

[One young man said he thought it was an excellent idea for younger children, especially when both parents were working. A parent added that blocking certain shows made a statement to children about individual and family values. The Vice President agreed that drawing a line was a significant part of parenting. Another participant expressed dismay that violence was presented as entertainment. The school prin-

cipal noted that violence had become too commonplace and stated the need to teach non-violence. He also praised the V-chip as a means to cope with unexpected violent or sexual content in movies shown on cable television.]

The President. Let me just say one final thing about this. Maybe we ought to change the name from V-chip to parent power chip.

One of the things that we talk about all the time, to go beyond this, is that all these technological changes that are going on in the world are so wonderful in so many ways, in making opportunities for people to do things they never could do before. But if we're not careful, they also make the majority of the people feel that they're losing control of their lives in many ways, not just this way, in many ways. And I think anything we can do to harness the power of new technology to give people more control back over their lives, their family lives, the workplace, the community, that's a good thing. We don't want people to feel powerless.

One of the things that frustrates people in this country is they feel like there are all these forces out there running around working on their lives, and they have no control over them. And this is maybe just one small step, but it's a way of saying to people that new technologies can put you back in the driver's seat in your life, not take you further and further out of it.

[A participant thanked the President and the Vice President for support of the V-chip legislation to empower parents.]

The President. It's still the most important work in this society. It's everybody's most important job.

Participants. Thank you.

The President. Thank you very much. Thanks again for having me here.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:05 a.m. at the residence of Ric and Jean Voigt.

Remarks at the Louisiana Economic Development Brunch February 9, 1996

The President. Thank you so much. Senator Johnston, I appreciate that, especially since you

don't have to run for reelection, that you said such a nice thing. [Laughter] Senator Johnston,